



Laura Keene was one of the most famous actors and stage managers of her time. She performed all over the world: in London, New York, California, and Australia. She achieved great financial success by starting her own theater in New York City. On October 15, 1858, *My American Cousin* debuted in Keene's theater. Keene had purchased the rights to the play, which was originally written by British playwright Tom Taylor. The story was a comedy about an American who must visit his English relatives to claim his inheritance. *My American Cousin* proved very popular – it was only scheduled to play for two weeks but instead, ran for 150 straight days.

Laura Keene, however, is best known for the events that occurred at Ford Theater's on the night of April 14, 1865, during the showing of *My American Cousin* in Washington, D.C. At 10:13 P.M., John Wilkes Booth shot President Lincoln, who had come to watch the play with his wife in celebration of the Union victory over the Confederate States of America in the American Civil War. Amidst the chaotic scene, Keene made her way through a labyrinth of passageways to the presidential box. She carried a pitcher of water, which served as her ticket inside. Sensing history was being made, Keene begged Dr. Charles Leale, who was attending to Lincoln, if she could see the dying president. Amazingly, Leale agreed. Keene proceeded to create a scene only an actor could imagine. Carefully, she cradled the president's head in her lap for several minutes. Keene's theatrics served no medical purpose whatsoever and ultimately served as a bizarre side note to one of the most tragic episodes in American history to that point. Keene cherished the colorful floral dress she wore that night, because the cuff bore bloodstains from the dying president. Over time, the dress was lost, but the cuff still exists today – complete with Lincoln's blood. It was donated to the National Museum of American History.

1. Why was Laura Keene admitted into the presidential box following the assassination?

2. Why do you feel that Keene felt a need to visit Lincoln after he was shot?

3. How did Keene's theatrical instincts take over?

This passage contains the following words. What do you think each word means? Write your definition and then use a dictionary or the internet to find the actual definition.

Word	Your Definition	Actual Definition
labyrinth		
chaotic		
cherished		

## Answers

1. She carried a pitcher of water with her.
2. Keene sensed that history was being made and realized she could play a part in it.
3. When Keene had entered the presidential box, she dramatized the scene by placing the dying president's head in her lap. It served no medical purpose whatsoever but she knew her actions would be remembered, in some way, for all of history.

## Vocabulary:

Labyrinth – maze

Chaotic – confusing, wild, and disorganized

Cherished – loved and treasured